

Uncovering an Indiana Treasure . . .

Madam C. J. Walker



"I am a woman who came from the cotton fields of the South. From there I was promoted to the washtub. From there I was promoted to the cook kitchen. And from there I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations . . . I have built my own factory on my own ground."

Madam Walker, National Negro Business League Convention, July 1912

Madam, a title that is typically French, brings to mind thoughts of the world's fashion and beauty capital. It also was a perfect designation for a woman involved in the cosmetics industry. Madam C. J. Walker was born Sarah Breedlove to Minerva and Owen Breedlove, on December 23, 1867, in Delta, Louisiana. She was the daughter of former slaves, had very little formal education, and her original employment was that of unskilled labor. Yet this woman, in an era when women did not have the right to vote, was one of the first American women of any race or rank to acquire great wealth through her own efforts. And the factory that she built was on ground that she owned in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Even though Madam Walker became one of the richest women in America, she did not always have an easy life. She lost both parents and her childhood home while still very young. She moved to Vicksburg, Louisiana where she married Moses McWilliams at 14, and had her only daughter, Lelia at 17. Unfortunately, she was widowed by the time she was 20, and in order to support herself and her daughter she worked as a laundress and then as a cook. Her second marriage to John Davis on August 11, 1894 failed and ended sometime in 1903.

Shortly after the end of her second marriage, Walker moved to St. Louis, Missouri where she started the company that founded her fortune. With only "two dollars and a dream," she experimented with a variety of ingredients to come up with formulas to improve hair growth. Ultimately, she developed three products: "Wonderful Hair Grower," "Glossine" (pressing oil) and "Vegetable Shampoo." She started selling these products door-to-door, and also started to instruct women on proper hair and scalp treatments. Business was soon booming.

To avoid competition from another local hair care company already in St. Louis, Walker moved her business to Denver, Colorado in 1905. Six months after her arrival, she was joined by Charles Joseph (C.J.) Walker, a friend and newspaper sales agent from St. Louis. The two were married on January 4, 1906, and both Madam and her company would forever be known by C. J. Walker's name – even though the marriage would last only another six years.

As business progressed the company was moved again in 1908 to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to take advantage of the city's steel production (for pressing combs), and its vast railway system – great for a mail order business. Madam Walker also was expanding her business to not only include her hair products, but also a method of hair care. Along with her daughter, Lelia, she established a beauty parlor and training school for "Walker Agents" named Lelia College. A graduate from the school would be trained in the "Walker Method for Hair Care" and would receive the title of "hair culturist." Word of the college spread quickly and hundreds of black women now had an opportunity to generate a substantial income that had never been available to them before.

Looking for a good location from which to manufacture and transport her goods, Madam Walker visited Indianapolis in February of 1910. At this time the city, known as the "Crossroads of America," was situated at the heart of the nation's transportation network. Even though it lacked a main waterway, Indianapolis had access to eight major railway systems. More than one million freight cars passed through the city's rail yard annually, and nearly 200 passenger trains arrived and departed daily. This transportation Mecca would be essential to Madam Walker's mail order business. In addition, Indianapolis was known for its thriving black community that supported several businesses, which were primarily located

along Indiana Avenue.

The first factory building for the Madam Walker Manufacturing Company was built on the east side of West Street between North and Walnut streets. In 1911, Madam Walker filed articles of incorporation with herself as the sole stockholder. At the height of her career, between 1911 and 1919, she ran a business grossing more than \$100,000 a year (\$119,000 in 1916), had as many as 15 employees in the factory in Indianapolis and had several thousand agents around the country.

With her wealth assured Madam Walker became a philanthropist and a patron of the arts. She made large contributions to orphanages, schools, and other charities. One of her largest donations, of \$1,000 (equivalent to \$20,000 in today's standards), was made to the Indianapolis Senate Avenue YMCA. She frequently hosted concerts and poetry readings and filled her home with art commissioned from black artists. To many people, she became known as "Lady Bountiful."

Madam also enjoyed being chauffeured around town and going to the movies to view the current silent films. She frequented many different theaters in downtown Indianapolis. Unfortunately, Indianapolis was not immune to the social ills of the day. Madam Walker soon found this out when she was told that the admission fees to the Isis Theater had increased from 10 cents to 25 cents, but for black customers only. Furious, she refused to pay the increased amount and promptly had her attorneys file a complaint against the theater. It was quickly and quietly settled out of court with Madam receiving her vindication.

It was this incident that prompted Madam Walker to make arrangements for the construction of a million dollar facility, five stories high and covering an entire city block. The Walker Building, designed by Rubush and Hunter, a prominent Indianapolis architectural firm, included not only the headquarters and factory for the Walker Company, but also included a 944-seat, African Motif Theater, a ballroom, a beauty shop, a drug store, a coffee shop and organizational and professional offices. Completed in 1927, the Walker building at 617 Indiana Avenue was Madam Walker's legacy to the city of Indianapolis.

Unfortunately, Madam Walker never lived to see the Walker Building in all its glory. She left Indianapolis and moved to New York in 1916, to further her company's interests. By this time she was suffering from severe hypertension due to her frenzied business life. Despite her doctor's recommendation to slow her lifestyle, Madam Walker continued to be heavily involved in her company and her causes. As a result, she died from kidney failure and related hypertension complications on May 25, 1919. She was only 51.

Additional Resources:

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Bundles, A'Lelia Perry. *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C. J. Walker*. Scribner & Associates, New York, NY, 2001.

Indiana Avenue: Street of Dreams. Videocassette. Tim Peterson, producer/director. Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, IN, 1984 (30 min).

Madam C. J. Walker, 1867-1919, Entrepreneur, Philanthropist, Social Activist (Madam Walker Home Page and Official Web Site). A'Lelia Perry Bundles, The Lewaro Corporation web site, 2001.
www.madamcjwalker.com

Two Dollars and a Dream. Videocassette. Stanley Nelson and Associates, producers. Filmmakers Library, New York, NY, 1987 (56 min).